

The Second War of Independence

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Fifty years ago, at dawn on October 29, 1956, Israeli paratroopers under the command of Colonel Ariel Sharon dropped into the Mitla Pass deep in the Sinai Peninsula, twenty-five miles from the Suez Canal. The action was the first phase in a plan secretly forged by representatives of France, Britain, and Israel, triggered by Egypt's nationalization of the canal three months before. According to the scheme, the paratroopers' landing would provide a pretext for the French and British governments to order both Egypt and Israel to remove all of their forces from the canal area. The Europeans anticipated that Cairo would reject that ultimatum, thus allowing them to occupy the strategic waterway. Israel dutifully executed its part of the scheme, smashing the Egyptian army in four days and conquering all of the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip. The Anglo-French armada, however, was late in arriving, and soon withdrew under intense international pressure. The Suez War—known in Israel as the Sinai Campaign, or Operation Kadesh—was over within a week, but the battle over its interpretation was merely beginning.

Numerous books and articles have been written about the Suez Crisis, the first post-World War II crisis to pit nationalism against imperialism, and the West against the Communist bloc. Historians have long agreed that the invasion was an unrelieved catastrophe for Britain and France, precipitating their expulsion from the Middle East and their decline as great powers. By contrast, the first three decades after the crisis saw debate over Israel's fortunes in the war, with some scholars asserting that Israel had benefited

from the destruction of the Egyptian army, the opening of the Straits of Tiran, and the strategic alliance with France. Starting in the 1980s, however, a movement of self-styled New Historians, dedicated to debunking the alleged “myths” of Israeli history, depicted the Sinai Campaign as no less disastrous for the Jewish state. “Israel... paid a heavy political price for ganging up with the colonial powers against the emergent forces of Arab nationalism,” wrote Avi Shlaim of Oxford University. “Its actions could henceforth be used as proof... that it was a bridgehead of Western imperialism in the... Arab world.”

Twenty years later, Shlaim’s analysis of the 1956 war has become universally accepted in academia, and not only among revisionists. In a *New York Times* article marking the fiftieth anniversary of Suez, Boston University’s David Fromkin, author of the widely acclaimed study of the origins of the modern Middle East, *A Peace to End All Peace* (1989), similarly portrayed Israel’s victory as Pyrrhic. “Israel compromised itself through its partnership with European imperialism,” Fromkin alleged, echoing Shlaim. “The more Israel won on the battlefield, the further it got from achieving the peace that it sought.”

Those who have challenged the magnitude of Israel’s victory in 1956, however, fail to take into account the incompleteness of Israel’s triumph in its 1948 War of Independence. Customarily, states that win on the battlefield dictate the terms of the peace. But while Israeli forces had repulsed the invading Arab armies and compelled them to sue for truce, Israeli negotiators failed to transform that military accomplishment into a diplomatic device for ending the conflict. The armistice agreements that Israel signed with its four neighboring Arab states between February and July 1949 did not, for example, extend recognition or legitimacy to the Jewish state; nor did they endow that state with permanent borders. Further complicating this anomalous situation, the agreements created various demilitarized zones of uncertain sovereignty along Israel’s frontiers—at the

foot of the Golan Heights, for instance, and in Nitzana, along the Sinai-Negev border. Most deleterious of all for Israel, the armistice did not provide for peace. On the contrary, the agreements allowed the Arabs to insist that a state of war continued to exist between them and the “Zionist entity.” This state of war, the Arabs argued, enabled them to fire at Israeli settlements in the demilitarized zones, to conduct an economic boycott of the Jewish state, and to blockade Israeli ships and Israel-bound cargoes through the Suez Canal and the Straits of Tiran. Arab states engaged in a relentless anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic propaganda campaign, designed to prepare their publics for a “second round” with Israel, this time to annihilate it. Propaganda did not suffice for some Arab countries, however, like Syria and Egypt, which sponsored cross-border terrorist (Fedayeen) attacks like that which killed eleven Israelis at Maaleh Akrabim in March 1954.

For the Arab states, the Palestine War, as they called it, had never really ended. Yet they were not alone in regarding Israel as an impermanent and unwanted presence: The Great Powers—the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union—routinely treated Israel as a passing phenomenon and ignored its fundamental interests. Indeed, for the Powers, Israel was little more than what United States Secretary of State John Foster Dulles called “a millstone around our necks.”

The period of 1948 to 1956 was one of profound upheaval in Great Power diplomacy in the Middle East. The United States was on the one hand striving to oust the old colonial powers, Britain and France, from the region, while on the other working with its European allies to prevent Soviet penetration. In response to the American threat, Britain and France sought to strengthen their alliances with local states—Britain with Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq, and France with Syria and Lebanon—by guaranteeing their security and selling them modern arms. Israel, which was in no Power’s interest, was completely left out of these arrangements. Worse, Israel’s clashes with Egypt in 1949 and Jordan in 1956 nearly resulted in direct conflict between the IDF and British forces.

Viewed antagonistically by both Britain and France, Israel was hardly valued as an asset by the United States. The Republican administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower owed nothing to the Jewish vote, and was closely aligned with State Department Arabists and American oil companies active in the Middle East. Apart from parade items such as helmets and batons, the United States adamantly refused to sell arms to Israel, even laboring to prevent Israel from purchasing weaponry from its allies. Such transactions, the administration reasoned, would push the Arabs into the Soviet sphere and endanger vital oil supplies.

For their part, the Soviets had also thrown their support behind the Arabs. Though they had provided crucial diplomatic and military backing to the Jewish state in 1948, the Soviets, having secured their objective of ousting the British from Palestine, proceeded to change sides. By 1951, they were unremitting in their hostility to Israel, and after Stalin's death in 1953, the Kremlin adopted a policy of nurturing "bourgeois nationalist" regimes opposed to the West, such as those of Egypt and Syria.

America and Britain reacted to the Soviet threat by trying to organize Middle Eastern states into a regional defense organization similar to NATO. The alliance, known first as the Middle East Defense Organization (MEDO) and later as the Baghdad Pact, was to include Iraq, Jordan, and hopefully Egypt. Israel, though it repeatedly petitioned for admission to the group, was continually rejected.

Moreover, while actively fortifying the Arabs, the Powers also implicitly upheld their own interpretation of the armistice. They refused, for example, to pressure the Arab states to end their economic boycott and blockade of Israel or to stem armed infiltration. Rather, they condemned Israel's attempt to establish settlements in the demilitarized zones, to send ships through the canal and the straits, and to retaliate against Fedayeen strongholds. They also opposed Israel's construction of a national water carrier that would transfer Galilee water to the Negev, thus facilitating the desert's settlement. The Negev, the Americans and the British determined in 1949, would eventually be detached from Israel and transferred to Arab sovereignty as part of a

land-for-peace deal. Indeed, an Anglo-American plan, inaugurated in 1954 and codenamed “Alpha,” called for the transfer of large swaths of the Negev to Egypt as a means of incentivizing it to join MEDO; the Egyptians, in turn, would grant non-belligerency—not peace—to Israel. Though Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion rejected Alpha, American and British leaders were prepared to exert immense pressure on him to implement the plan should Cairo accept it.

Indeed, the Egyptians had long demanded the Negev as a land bridge between them and the Arab world. In secret meetings with Israeli diplomats after the armistice, Egyptian representatives repeatedly demanded that Israel forfeit all of the Negev—62 percent of its territory—as the price of ending the conflict. But the Egyptians were also express in stating that peace with the Jewish state was inconceivable for the foreseeable future. That position remained unchanged after the Egyptian Revolution of July 1952 and the ascendance of Colonel Gamal Abd el-Nasser to power. Though Nasser continued the secret contacts with Israel, at one point even exchanging letters with Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett, at no time did he waver from the demand for all of the Negev, or change his rejection of immediate and full peace. In fact, starting in December 1954, Nasser embarked on a campaign to extend his primacy over the entire Arab world—an effort that required escalated hostility toward Israel and intensified opposition to the West. He proceeded to tighten the blockade and boycott of Israel, to order the Egyptian army to occupy parts of Nitzana, and to set up Fedayeen units to operate out of Gaza. He also declared war against the Baghdad Pact, rejecting Alpha and signing, in September 1955, the largest-ever Middle Eastern arms deal with the Soviet bloc.

This, then, was the regional and international situation that Israel confronted in the period before the Sinai Campaign. Surrounded by Arab states that were conducting acts of war against it—indeed, were arming themselves to obliterate it—Israel had no allies, no diplomatic support,

and no reliable supplier of weapons. Moreover, saddled with tens of thousands of new immigrants, many of them indigent, and a near-bankrupt economy in the wake of a devastating war that had killed 1 percent of its population, Israel was scarcely capable of maintaining its existence, much less of defending itself against Nasser, a regionally beloved and lavishly armed leader committed to its destruction. “O Israel! Weep... and await your end at any time now,” declared the Egyptian-run Voice of the Arabs radio in 1955. “The Arabs of Egypt have found their way to Tel Aviv.”

Israel’s plight indeed seemed hopeless when, suddenly, in July 1956, Nasser announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal. The event prodced the French, who had begun to view Israel as a possible ally against Nasser and his support for Algerian rebels, to open secret discussions on a joint operation in Egypt and undertake to arm the IDF. The French, in turn, urged the British to cease threatening the Israelis and join in the clandestine talks. The result was the Sèvres agreement, named after the Paris suburb in which it was surreptitiously signed. According to the document, Israel agreed to commence hostilities against Egypt. One month later, Sharon and his paratroopers descended into the Mitla Pass and the Sinai Campaign began.

The fighting was brutal, but the Israeli forces succeeded in crushing Nasser’s troops with their newly supplied Soviet arms, conquering all of the Sinai and Gaza, and reaching the Suez Canal. Though a combination of Soviet military and American economic threats eventually persuaded Ben-Gurion to evacuate these territories, in return he received American pledges for Israel’s future defense, along with the deployment of UN peacekeepers along the border with Egypt and in Sharm al-Sheikh, overlooking the Straits of Tiran. Finally freed of the danger of Egyptian attack and strengthened through commerce with Asia by way of the straits, Israel enjoyed a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity. It took advantage of those years to absorb waves of new immigrants and to galvanize its civil society. Many Israelis who lived through that time remember the decade after 1956 as

the most halcyon in their lives, and in their country's history. And though Nasser unilaterally evicted the UN force in May 1967 and again blockaded the straits, the security guarantees Israel had obtained from the United States in 1956, and the international commitments it received regarding the inviolability of its borders and shipping rights, proved essential to generating support for Israel in the Six Day War.

Equally important, at least, was the permanence that Israel achieved as a result of the Sinai Campaign. In the aftermath of the war, the Powers ceased to regard Israel as a temporary entity whose territory could be bargained off to the Arabs. There would be no more Alphas, no more attempts to deprive Israel of the Negev or of any other part of its sovereign land. Nor did the United States endeavor to block Israel's acquisition of modern arms, which continued to flow from France. Indeed, with French assistance, Israel built the nuclear reactor that endowed it with capabilities unequaled except by those of the world's greatest powers.

Finally, though Israel did, by virtue of its collusion with Britain and France, confirm the Arab charge that the Jewish state was little more than a beachhead for imperialism, in truth that charge exists far more in the minds of contemporary Western historians than in Arab thinking of the late 1950s. An examination of Arab broadcasts and newspapers from the period reveals no substantial change in Arab hostility toward Israel—it was absolute before the war, and no less total after it. Similarly, the war could not have lessened chances for the success of a peace process that simply did not exist and, according to Nasser, would not for many, many years.

Contrary, then, to the conventional wisdom in academic circles today, Israel emerged from the Sinai Campaign economically, diplomatically, and militarily strengthened. It had forged vital alliances and earned the respect, if not yet the affection, of the Great Powers, while also enhancing its citizens' security. The situation that existed after 1948, in which Israel

was denied legitimacy, permanence, and such fundamental rights as safe borders and freedom of shipping, had ended. The 1956 war allowed Israel to realize, finally, the unfulfilled aspirations of 1948, and in this represents the culmination of Israel's fight for independence.

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